

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN

Sanghas and Women's Federations - Partners for Women and Girls' Empowerment

Executive Summary

Mahila Samakhya, a programme of the Ministry of Human Resource Development working in ten states, towards empowering women and adolescent girls through education has, over the years, built a large, robust base of women's collectives at various levels. These collectives, called **Sanghas**, of women at the village level are networked into **Federations** at the cluster, block and often at district levels.

Why are Federations important?

Sangha-Federations are grassroots women's organisations in which:

- Women are seen as an embodiment of knowledge, the source of collective strength and as change agents working towards a gender-just society rather than just as individual beneficiaries of welfare schemes
- The focus is women's rights, voice and collective empowerment. The approach is bottom up and is accountable to *Sanghas* and their issues.
- Members are articulate, energetic and leaders in their own right, capable of challenging patriarchal norms that undermine the progress and intrinsic dignity of women.



Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and Federations: Possibilities for Partnerships



Ministry Priorities and Contributions of Federations:

- **Provide social assistance to marginalised populations:** Federations which are closely linked to women's issues ensure that marginalised sections of society are aware of their entitlements, including housing, old age pension, widow pension, MGNREGA, and other benefits.
 - **Increase participation of people in rural development programmes:** Federations have innovated participatory monitoring tools such as the Data Exhibition (Box 1) to ensure that the intended beneficiaries get the right benefits. Such innovations can be used as both planning and social audit tools to ensure effective implementation of programmes.
- **Enable the process of women's empowerment and bring them into mainstream development:** Federations representing a critical mass of marginalised women, are best suited to present their issues and increase their participation in development processes.

Policy Messages

1. Increase community participation and oversight through Federations

The involvement of the Federations will bring in the force and strength of participation, voice, oversight, and multiple perspectives, both from an instrumental or a rights point of view.

2. Rights-based women's federations as implementation partners for MoRD

Sanghas and federations being grassroots women's organizations, have their strength in being accountable, transparent, and focused on quality. MoRD could consider them as implementation partners for its programmes on the ground.

Challenges for the Ministry of Rural Development

The Ministry of Rural Development encounters numerous challenges in ensuring that government services reach the intended beneficiaries in the rural areas. Panchayats are inclusive institutions by intent, but in practice, are plagued by various limitations ranging from local biases, lack of responsible citizenship, inadequate technical capacity, insufficient monetary and other resources, further accentuated by corruption, opaqueness, and gender insensitivity. Some of these challenges and possible solutions are outlined below.

Challenge 1: Ensuring services and programmes reach the right beneficiaries

The lack of citizen participation in the planning and monitoring of local governments, lack of awareness about entitlements and programmes, and apathy towards corruption, do not allow for a two-way planning process where needs feed into plans and benefits reach the right people.

Solution 1: Promote community based monitoring and planning mechanisms

The Data Exhibition is a revolutionary innovation where community members themselves collect information on people's entitlements which is publicly displayed, so that the community is aware of gaps in actually receiving entitlements. Such community monitoring tools challenge corruption, increase transparency and ensure that actual beneficiaries receive their dues (see Box 1) Through this initiative, communities can 1) ensure that funds are spent well so that desired outcomes reach all intended beneficiaries, 2) overcome local biases - party, class, caste, gender, and other patron-client approaches - that skew beneficiary selection and allocation of benefits, 3) ensure women can access their entitlements, 4) ensure inclusion of the invisible poor and the marginalized, and 5) guarantee transparency, equity, and accountability.

MoRD could consider assigning budgets to *Sanghas* and federations to implement such monitoring and planning tools.



Box 1: Data Exhibition

The federations along with Assam Mahila Samata Society have designed an innovative process of citizen monitoring to promote transparency in panchayat administration.

The term 'Data Exhibition' refers to a display of information collected and exhibited in a public place for the benefit of the entire community. Data is compiled through detailed household surveys, along with official data obtained through exercising the Right to Information Act. This then reveals gaps between the reality of actual beneficiaries versus the official information reported by the Gram Panchayat or line departments. Panchayats and government department representatives are invited to this event along with the community.

The Data Exhibition can be instrumental in influencing the official panchayat plans making it participatory in nature. The Data Exhibition is a powerful planning and monitoring instrument to reduce corruption and increase transparency in the system.

Impact

- Increased awareness of Gram Sabhas on entitlements and programmes
- Capacities of communities built to assess their needs to then feed into the planning process
- Mobilisation of Gram Sabhas to participate in planning processes
- Increased participation of women in planning and public life
- The poor and marginalized access their entitlements
- Monitor and ensure that the 'right people get the right benefits'
- Monitor the implementation of Panchayat plans
- Reduction of corruption in service delivery

Challenge 2: Programme Implementation of Panchayats is not Inclusive

Often Panchayat programmes and budgets are not fully utilized within the stipulated time period and do not reach the most needy or deserving. The poor and the marginalized are not able to access these programmes due to lack of transparency and information.

Solution 2: Promote and Partner with civil society organizations

Federations being grounded at the grassroots are inclusive of the poorest and the most marginalised members of the community. *Sanghas* and federations are secular, gender sensitive, and based on egalitarian, human rights principles. There are many ways in which *Sanghas* and federations can have a mutually rewarding relationship with Panchayats to implement rural development programmes targeting the poor (see Box 2). *Sanghas* and federations can raise awareness among community members regarding flow of funds and entitlements for the development initiatives. The MoRD could promote community-driven demand mechanisms for better utilization of funds and effectiveness of programme implementation.



Strengths of Federations

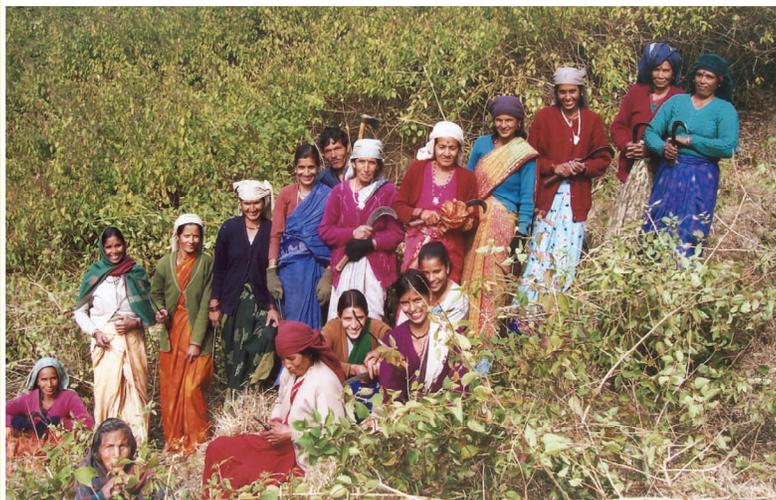
- Federations have the potential to act as **resource groups** to raise awareness and promote demand for rural development programmes. Being run by women, they can ensure gender equity in programme implementation
- Federations **deal with multiple issues** and therefore, have the capacity to develop and host several innovations around a range of social and economic issues such as education, health, and employment.
- Federations, **built on democratic principles**, have evolved in structure so as to enable a non-hierarchical style of functioning, which is transparent, participatory and decentralized. The federations thus act as training grounds for women to participate as leaders in the governance mechanisms of the country as demonstrated in many states.
- Federations, have **delivered services with transparency and without corruption** while running several contracts for the Mid-day Meal programme and the Public Distribution System among others
- Federations bring forward the perspectives and needs of women. They are secular and **inclusive of the most marginalized** communities and most importantly, raise issues which are beneficial to the community as a whole.

Box 2: Federations and MNREGA

The federations have played a pivotal role in taking up issues for the community like access to water, adequate wages, and employment entitlements under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).

In some states for example, the MS federations have been more successful in procuring a relatively higher number of days of employment for the needy in their villages. In Uttarakhand, the federation members are able to access employment under MGNREGS by raising the demand for it in the Gram Sabhas. Nationally, studies in other states show that the average number of days reported per person employed under MGNREGS was only as high as 10 days, while in Uttarakhand the highest reported was 27 days per woman in Pauri district.

The high number of working days has been achieved through rigorous advocacy undertaken by the federations at the panchayats. The women have wrested their economic rights from the panchayats by virtue of being elected representatives in the PRIs and launching a wide-spread movement encouraging their peers to lay claim to their rights.



Overall Policy Messages

Sanghas and federations have the requisite strength, scale and quality to be an equal partner in social change. Being rights-based, grassroots women's organisations, the *Sanghas* and federations are the best fit for social and gender audits, and for community oversight as required by the Ministry. These federations, built on democratic principles, have evolved with non-hierarchical structures that ensure transparent, participatory and decentralized planning and monitoring. In recognition of the need to universalize this approach across the country, a number of corollaries emerge:

1. Increase community participation and oversight through Federations

Based on a rare combination of rights-based principles, and gender perspectives, the *Sanghas* and federations are uniquely positioned to bring in the perspectives of women, adolescent girls, and even men. Such participation of grass roots civil society institutions provide social guarantee to the success of rural development goals. Whether viewed from an instrumental or a rights point of view, the involvement of the Federations will nonetheless bring in the force and strength of participation, voice, oversight, and multiple perspectives. The *Sangha-Federation* should, therefore, be recognized as an *equal partner in rural development* wherever they are present. The MoRD should, therefore, support and provide resources to the *Sangha-Federations* as the community oversight organizations and *formally institutionalize the Data Exhibition as a social audit tool* to provide that oversight.

2. Rights-based women's federations as implementation partners for MoRD

Sangha-Federations' capacity to implement programmes are one of their greatest strengths. As a grass roots women's organization, it has the intrinsic strength of being more accountable and transparent, and focused on quality - three core attributes of any successful delivery mechanism. MoRD must consider *Sangha-Federations* as *implementation partners* for its programmes on the ground, to assist Gram Panchayats and Block Panchayats in outreach, enhance awareness of programmes, select beneficiaries, and increase participation in the Gram Sabha.

Sangha-Federations being specifically sensitive to women's needs, dignity, rights and entitlements, can ensure a pro-woman perspective and enforcements of these norms in all programmes. To ensure this perspective in Gram Panchayat and Block Panchayat planning, *Sangha-Federations* can offer their services *for information provision on programmes and entitlements, appropriate beneficiary selection and inclusion of women.*



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